THE BEAUMONT BUILDING · EST. 1927

Sixth Floor, Please

a short story

Ida had operated the Beaumont's elevator for thirty-one years, which meant she knew things about the tenants that even their own families didn't — not facts, exactly, but rhythms. Mr. Okafor on four always straightened his tie in the brass panel a half-second before the doors opened, whether or not anyone was waiting for him. The Delacroix girl on nine hummed the same four notes every morning and never noticed she was doing it. Everyone had a shape they wore only inside the car, for the eleven seconds it took to rise past a floor they weren't going to.

The building had modernized around her twice — new elevators installed in '68 and again in '94, both times with buttons instead of

a lever, both times decommissioned within a year because the owners liked the story of Ida better than the convenience of the machines. So she stayed: brass lever, brass gate, a stool she never sat on, and a small clock bolted above the door that ran four minutes fast, which she had never once corrected, because everyone in the building had long since adjusted their sense of time to match it instead.

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FLOOR 1 — Lobby. Marble, cold in August.
FLOOR 3 — Silence, always. Nobody has explained why.
FLOOR 6 — Requested, on average, four times a week. No
tenant listed.
FLOOR 9 — Humming. Delacroix. On time.
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The thing about Floor Six was that the Beaumont didn't have one. The building's directory went straight from five to seven — a superstition baked in by the original architect, who'd read somewhere that unlucky numbers cost buildings their tenants, and simply removed the number rather than argue with luck. The elevator car itself agreed: five, then seven, brass digits worn smooth by three decades of thumbs.

And yet. Perhaps once a week, sometimes twice, someone would step into the car, and before Ida could ask, they'd say it plainly, the way you'd ask for a place you'd been a hundred times.

"Sixth floor, please."

She'd learned not to correct them right away. In the early years she had — *there's no sixth floor, ma'am, we go five to seven* — and watched something flicker across their face each time, not confusion exactly, more like the look of a person patting their pockets for keys they were certain, a moment ago, they'd been holding. They'd laugh it off. *Of course, silly me, seven then.* And she'd take them to seven, and they'd step out, and that was that.

But she started noticing who asked. A man in a gray coat, the week after his wife's funeral, standing in the exact spot he must have stood a hundred times before, saying it to the brass panel like a password he hadn't been told had expired. A woman, years later, on the anniversary of something Ida never learned, asking for the sixth floor with her eyes already wet before the doors had shut.

It was always someone carrying an absence. Never announced as one — nobody stepped into her elevator and said *I am grieving, take me somewhere that no longer exists* — but she'd operated that lever long enough to read a body the way a doctor reads a chart, and grief, she'd found, has a very particular way of standing in an elevator. Weight on the back foot. Eyes on the numbers instead of the person holding the lever. A held breath released only once the gate closed.

03:41 PM — Gray coat. Third week of March. "Sixth floor, please."
03:42 PM — Ida takes him to seven. He does not appear to notice the difference.

So somewhere around year eleven, without deciding to exactly, Ida stopped correcting them. When someone asked for the sixth floor, she simply pulled the lever, let the car rise past the floor that didn't exist at the ordinary speed, same as any other, and said nothing at all. Not seven — not any number. Just the ride. A slow rise past a gap in the architecture, exactly as long as any other floor would have taken, and then the doors opening onto seven anyway, gently, like nothing unusual had happened, because as far as the building was concerned, nothing had.

Nobody ever asked her to do this. She'd simply understood, the way you understand a silence is meant to be sat in rather than filled, that what they were asking for wasn't a floor. It was permission to go somewhere for eleven seconds that the directory didn't recognize and the building didn't allow and nobody would ever be able to prove had happened at all — and to be taken there, without question, by someone who wouldn't say the word *gone* out loud on their behalf.

She retired at sixty-eight, the brass lever handed to a nephew who'd trained for two weeks and still flinched at the weight of the gate. On her last day, an elderly woman she didn't recognize stepped into the car, said "sixth floor, please" in a voice gone thin with age, and Ida — for the last time — simply pulled the lever and said nothing, and rode the both of them up past a floor that had never existed, at exactly the right speed, for exactly long enough.

Some floors you can't build. You can only agree, quietly, to stop where someone needs you to.